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## Counselling and Guidance of Volunteers in Romania – a psychological approach

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### Abstract

The year of 2011 was declared the European year of Volunteering that Promote Active Citizenship, in recognition of the efforts made by volunteers from European countries and the organizations in which they are involved. Within the European Union, Romania registers one of the lowest percentages of participation of people in volunteering, and this activity is still poorly regulated and developed in the non-profit organizations (especially public ones). Volunteering is still an emerging practice in Romania, although this country has had a democratic government for the last two decades. Among explanations of volunteering underdeveloped we have to include the insufficient application of counselling and guidance to volunteers, as an essential component of this particular type of human resources management.

This article aims to present the current state of volunteering in Romania (a brief history, findings of studies conducted at national level and its main features) and to approach issues relevant to psychological counselling and guidance of volunteers, as they are practiced today.

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### 1. Background

The year 2011 was declared the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship (EYV 2011) by an European Council Decision in November 2009, as a recognition of the efforts of European volunteers and the organizations sustaining their activities. Also, this declaration marks ten years of the previous EVY (2001), which in the case of Romania had a major positive effect: the adoption of the Law of Volunteering. According to this law, volunteering is defined as “an activity of public interest, undertaken out of free will by a person aiming at helping others, without being motivated by financial or material gains”. The organization hosting the volunteers or carrying out the voluntary activities must be a non-profit one (public or private).

Although the legal framework existed for a decade, volunteering is still a vague concept in Romania, for at least two major reasons. The first cause of imprecision is due to the association of the term “voluntarily” with paid professional practice, the most famous example of this is the use of the law that regulates “voluntary military service” (a form designed to stress that military service is no longer mandatory), which stipulates that the volunteer soldiers will receive a monthly payment for their contracted services. Similar provisions are included in the laws of

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organization of community services for firemen and mountain rescuers (whose members are paid for interventions) but are called "voluntary" to distinguish them from permanent services, organized at county level. The second cause regards the use in the pejorative way of the expression "voluntary work" in the communist period in Romania, during which meant unpaid and mandatory activities, imposed by the communist public administration on its citizens (such as agricultural activities, cleaning public places, and gathering recyclables) (Voicu and Voicu, 2003).

Due to the limited feature of the legal understanding, it has been tried a development of volunteering definition closer to the local reality, within the National Council of Volunteering (June 2002). The following definition was adopted by consensus: "Volunteering is an activity carried out by any individual, on own initiative, for the benefit of others, without receiving any payment". Due to its nonrestrictive nature and the fact that it was adopted in a consensual manner (by a forum established at national level), this particular definition is more often used in comparison with other definitions used in the associations environment in Romania.

In the preparation EVY 2011 was published a research report on volunteering in Romania ("Study of Volunteering in the European Union. Country Report Romania"), which includes the most significant research data on volunteering. Regarding the number of volunteers, the report highlights that, when invoked the result of investigations on the percentage of volunteers within population, special attention should be paid both to different research methodologies used (e.g. items used or sampling method) and to the fact they rely on self-assessment and do not provide other objective ways of measuring. Within the recent studies conducted in the last decade the percentage of those who stated they had been volunteers in Romania currently varies between 10-15% of the adult population and the differences between the percentages of people who report volunteering in Romania are due in particular to the understanding of the term "voluntary" within various investigations. For example, this percentages decrease if the chosen criterion is the type of association in which Romanians say they are volunteers. Bogdan Voicu (2005, 128-130) stands for the exclusion from this category of trade unions, political parties and religious organizations where volunteering exists. After excluding these three types of organizations, the proportion of volunteers in Romania compared to European countries can be assessed (based on the "European Values Survey" - 1999) as one of the lowest, only seven percents of the population. This percentage are only a quarter of the average percentage of the Western Europe countries and less than half compared to the average of former communist countries. The conclusion of this analysis is that at European level "localization in Romania has the most negative influence (except Russia) on the individual probability for volunteering" (Voicu, 2005, 124).

In recent years it is known a slight numerical increase in volunteering in Romania: implementation of the "European Values Survey" in 2008 indicates a 12.8% percentage of volunteers among the adult population - increased compared to 1999 - a growth also mentioned in the country report published by European Commission (2010, 6). This trend is consistent with the increased visibility of volunteering in recent years (due to the development of the network of volunteering centers, awareness campaigns and the involvement of public figures as volunteers, especially from the media).

## **2. Purpose of Study**

This article aims to present the current state of volunteering in Romania (a brief history, findings of studies conducted at national level and its main features) and to approach issues relevant to psychological counseling and guidance of volunteers, as they are practiced today.

## **3. Sources of Evidence**

The evolution of volunteering in Romania is closely related to the non-profit sector. Nonprofit organizations have begun to develop in Romania with the late Middle Ages: guilds, social protection establishments, cultural associations, etc. In the first half of the twentieth century, non-governmental organizations have grown substantially both numerically and by diversifying the area of concern, while in the communist period, various forms of association were functioning under strict state control. After the democratization in the early '90s, certain NGOs

have been established, but the number of active NGOs is still below the average of European countries (including the ex-communist countries).

Volunteering appeared first in the post-communist period as an "imported" practice as a result of volunteer activity of the international NGOs operating in Romania in the early '90s. Subsequently, it has been taken as an actional model and regulated by the law occurred in 2001. In the past decade, the voluntary movement evolved very promising, through the development of several volunteering centers in different parts of the country, reunited in a national network, by campaigns implemented nationwide and by the organization of conferences devoted to volunteering.

Unlike the paid staff from the non-profit organizations, the volunteers cannot be motivated by cash or other material rewards, their activity being more effective if a counselling and guidance focused on getting a type of intrinsic motivation is realized. This type of approach is not suitable for the great majority of human resource specialists, who are trained to motivate the staff from productive economic activities.

Volunteer work in nonprofit organizations is the theme of a distinct type of human resource management, applicable to volunteers. Pro Vobis National Volunteering Center describes the management of volunteers applicable within a Romanian non-profit organization through the following steps (Pro Vobis, 2009):

- 1) Preparing the organization for involving volunteers implies changes at the level of organizational documents, the attitudes of members and working style;

- 2) The recruitment of volunteers is the process by which the organization invites and attracts people to engage in volunteering activities to meet the proposed activities and fulfill its mission;

- 3) The selection of volunteers aims both to identify the best volunteer for the organization's activities and to find or create appropriate activities for volunteers who come into the organization and will not fit any existing positions;

- 4) Orientation and training of volunteers. The orientation session (or the "welcome" session) is an opportunity for the volunteers to familiarize themselves with the organization and its specific activities. It is also necessary to know the existing training opportunities;

- 5) The supervision of volunteers is an ongoing monitoring task of the work of volunteers, a task which belongs to the coordinator of the volunteers. The coordinator must ensure that volunteers are performing normally, that the objectives are met when needed and in optimal quality parameters and that the team is united and has no internal conflicts;

- 6) Motivating volunteers. In order to motivate volunteers, the volunteer coordinator must take into account the complexity and diversity of reasons that have led them to offer their time and use their skills within the organization;

- 7) The recognizing of the merits of volunteers should exist in everything accomplished, in order to attract, inspire and maintain the motivation of volunteers. In other words, this does not only consist in an event, a gift or a prize to reward volunteers for their contribution, but it is a continuous process;

- 8) Ensuring a proper relationship between volunteers and staff. When the organization has both staff and volunteers, the relationship between them is essential, especially given the differences between them in motivational terms. Usually, the volunteer coordinator representing them in front of employees and he must constantly ensure that employees understand, respect and contribute to the increase of volunteers motivation;

- 9) Evaluation of programs / projects and volunteers. It involves the collection and analysis of certain measurable results regarding the involvement of volunteers, which justifies the program and demonstrates its positive effects.

#### **4. Main Argument**

In order to achieve effective management of volunteers in the non-profit organizations (type of organizations where volunteers can be involved, under Romanian law) it is necessary to apply a different type of counselling and guidance methods, in which the emphasis is set on psychological aspects, on getting the volunteer's long-term motivation to participate in the activities of the organization.

Regarding the motivations that led to the involvement of volunteers in NGO activities, a survey carried out in 2007 (Rigman, 2008) describes the following categories, based on the interrogation of a total of 427 volunteers from 12 cities (multiple choice questions): the need to gain experience in a certain field (52.0%), desire to help those in

need (51.1%), opportunity to make friends (49.4%), the possibility of going abroad (40.7%), the need to improve my CV (38.2%), the possibility of testing the future qualification/job (32.3%), the opportunity to implement my ideas (10.3% ), other reasons (curiosity; the existence of a person with disabilities in a family; complementarity with the field of study / work, leisure): 8.2%.

In general, benefiting from professional experience was seen as one of the key benefits of engaging in voluntary activities, because that the formal education alone cannot provide individuals (especially students or those just starting out in their careers) with sound practical experience of the professional world. This explanation is sustained by the fact that the number of students has steadily grown in Romania and nowadays employers expect potential employees to have more than a university diploma (Study of Volunteering in the European Union. Country Report Romania, 47).

The methods of counselling and guidance of volunteers currently practiced in Romania (generally, taken from the school counselling field, in order to establish an occupational profile) are insufficient, because there is a discrepancy between the roles assigned by the organizations and the accomplishment of those roles by the volunteers - observable by differences of assessing the degree of involvement in various activities:

Table 1. Types of activities performed by volunteers – question with multiple answers, N= 427 (apud Rigman, 2008, 5)

Type of activity	The percentage of volunteers developing the type of activity	The percentage of representatives of the organizations sustaining that volunteers develop the type of activity
Working with beneficiaries	29,74%	48,4%
Organizing events	15,97%	83,9%
Management / coordinating activities	12,04%	0%
Communication /Public relations	11,80%	0%
Public campaigns	7,62%	0%
Office administrative activities	6,15%	45,2%
Typing documents	5,16%	51,6%
Fund raisings	3,20%	48,4%
Research and/or social surveys	3,20%	0%
Ecology and tourism	0,74%	0%
Maintenance of assets	0,50%	0%
Coordinating other volunteers	0,50%	0%
Other activities	0,25%	6,4%

The differences of perception regarding the activities carried out can be explained by motivational factors: the volunteers have a special motivation in acquiring experience related to their work, and the staff of the nonprofit organization understands their involvement depending on the organization's needs, by applying the steps of volunteers management.

## 5. Conclusions

1. Volunteering is still an emerging practice in Romania, although this country has had a democratic government for the last two decades. Among explanations of volunteering underdeveloped we have to include the insufficient application of counselling and guidance to volunteers, as an essential component of this particular type of human resources management. Although the presence and role of volunteers in the Romanian nonprofit organizations are

increasing these days, the management of volunteers is currently applied sporadically and it is not seen as a mean of organizational development.

2. The last decade has outlined the main directions of volunteering development in Romania (Andronic, 2009, 83-87):

a) Using volunteering in the activities of nonprofit organizations of public concern. After the occurrence of the Law of Volunteering (in 2001), appeared a series of laws governing the work of volunteers in several areas in which nonprofit organizations of public concern operate, child protection, volunteer emergency services, civil protection, home care services for elderly people, environmental protection;

b) The emergence of corporate volunteering, as a form of social responsibility manifestation. What's missing volunteering in the Romanian companies is similar to what is lacking in public non-profit volunteer organizations: too few volunteer's supervisors genuine preoccupied by own activity and the whole approach of the involvement of volunteers is (still) regarded as an organizational epiphenomenon;

c) Expanding and professionalizing the network of volunteer centers in Romania. There are volunteer centers that already have a decade of operation, a national center and a network (founded in 2001) which now comprises twelve volunteer centers. The network centers organize under a common theme "TheNational Volunteer Week" and coordinate their efforts to celebrate each year (December 5) the "International Volunteer Day."

d) Strengthening of the the NGO sector as the main "market" of volunteering. Because regarding the public sector and the corporate volunteering , the evolution is still emerging, Romanian NGOs are the main "market" where volunteer supply meets demand , often in a less structured way, due to insufficient development of the network of volunteer centers.

3) 2011 EVY activities in Romania will focus on achieving the following national priorities:

- Developing a National Strategy for the Development of Volunteering in Romania and its implementation plan for the next three years
- Improving and harmonizing the legal framework governing voluntary work in Romania;
- Creating an online platform for the management of supply and demand of volunteers at the national level;
- Organization of real volunteering actions in collaboration with all stakeholders;
- Initiating a complex process of creating a system of recognition of skills acquired through volunteering and involving all stakeholders;
- Organizing a national event to recognize volunteers;
- Placing volunteering on the public agenda through various communication channels and through different messages to raise awareness about the value and importance of volunteering for the Romanian society.

4) It is needed a continuing adequacy of the methods of counselling and guidance to the specific volunteer activities. Very few methods now applied in volunteer management take into account their motivation and succeed to also contribute to the achievement of organizational objectives. It is anticipated that volunteering is continuing to increase in Romania, so the counselling and guidance of volunteers will become more and more a distinct activity.

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